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SUBJECT: AN ANTI-U.S. ECHO CHAMBER IN BANGALORE'S URDU SPEAKING  
COMMUNITY

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Deeply felt Muslim resentment over the Iraq war and U.S. policies in the Middle East, as well as misperceptions of American society emerged during a planned literary discussion in Bangalore between Urdu writers and journalists and visiting American author Eddy Harris. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) On May 5, U.S. Speaker Program participant Eddy Harris met with a group of seven prominent Urdu writers and journalists in Bangalore as part of Harris' South India program arranged by post's Public Affairs Section. The meeting was hosted by M.A. Siraj, a leading moderate Islamic scholar and social commentator, and also attended by post's Cultural Affairs Officer (an Urdu speaker) and locally-engaged program specialist.

¶3. (SBU) What was planned to be a genteel conversation about literature quickly became very heated when Ms. Farida Rahmatullah, a writer and poet, asked Mr. Harris' opinion of the war in Iraq. Without waiting for him to reply, Ms. Rahmatullah and Ms. Fauzia Chaudhry, an Urdu language professor, switched into Urdu and launched into a diatribe against the U.S. Notably, U.S. foreign policy was not the only target. Aside from asking questions about how the U.S. can kill innocent children every day in Iraq and Afghanistan, the writers and journalists asked about what they perceived to be the poor status of women in the U.S. and whether the U.S. can still call itself a democracy.

¶4. (SBU) About the U.S. media, Ms. Rahmatullah said that it is not free and independent but merely propaganda outlet that ignores the suffering of the people of Iraq and Afghanistan and pushes an obvious imperialist agenda. Ms. Chaudhry added that the U.S. needs to know that "they" (presumably referring to the Urdu speaking community at large) are not stupid -- as they watch Al Jazeera and see what is really happening. Notably, everyone in the group jumped on the bandwagon, their heads nodding in response to each other's statements. Even Mr. Siraj, controversial in his community for his moderate social views, stated that the U.S. is no longer a democracy as it is held hostage by the Israeli lobby, and that he fears the U.S. is becoming a fascist state. (Note: CAO observed that while many of the group's questions and comments seemed quite out of touch with reality, the convictions behind them were very strongly held. End note.) The group did listen when Mr. Harris and the Consulate representatives rebutted their misconceptions.

¶5. (SBU) The group also set its sights on Mr. Harris, castigating him for not writing about Iraq. They said every writer in their community is writing extensively about U.S. foreign policy and the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. (Comment: This, indeed, appears to be the problem as this echo chamber amongst Bangalore's Urdu speakers reinforces a very negative view of the U.S. Thus, notwithstanding the high regard many urban Indians have for the

U.S., this community is an exception and consequently a public diplomacy challenge. End comment.)

¶6. (SBU) In the end, the group warmly expressed their appreciation of the chance to engage with Consulate officials, particularly in Urdu, and they said they would welcome opportunities to do so again.

Ms. Chaudhry colorfully added that the group only felt comfortable enough to initiate such a conversation because Mr. Harris is black and "in every white man we see George Bush."

¶7. (SBU) Comment: PAS Chennai chose to meet these writers and journalists because they are the leaders and opinion-makers of Bangalore's Urdu speaking community. We can assume that if they hold such vehemently anti-U.S. views that many in the community follow their lead. Urdu newspapers in Bangalore have up to 100 thousand readers; eleven percent of Karnataka's 52 million inhabitants - roughly 5.7 million people - are Muslim. This highlights the depth of this public diplomacy challenge. The contentiousness of this encounter was an exception to the others programs of Eddy Harris' excellent and largely literary tour of South India. Other programs will be reported septel. End Comment.

HOPPER